

Message from the Mayor: Giving Thanks

Thank you for your patience, perseverance and your continued support of your neighbors through this October storm and with the unprecedented weather related events of the past year in Westfield, damaging weather events have always been measured against the Great Flood of 55. The June 1 tornado eclipsed that event and at the time it was unfathomable to think that we would be subject to another weather event near that magnitude. There is no question that the Nor'easter of October 29th, 2011, wreaked havoc on a monumental scale as it was a citywide disaster. The G&E inventory includes over 400 miles of wires, hundreds of transformers and thousands of poles scattered over 270 miles of roadway in a city that is nearly 48 square miles in size. Over 80% of the city's power was immediately knocked out in the morning after the storm and nearly every road was impassable and had nearly a foot of snow on it.

But once again, our city employees answered the call. For most of them, they left their families in the dark and started working during the storm and continued to work around the clock to get the job done. To each of them, their message to me was that they wouldn't stop until every one of their fellow citizens had power restored. This spirit has been a continuous theme with the Blizzard of January, the June Tornado, the August Hurricane and flood aftermath and now this. We are all truly thankful to them for their commitment to all of us in our greatest times of need.

Through all of this our water continued to run, our wastewater plant continued to operate and sanitation worked on a regular weekly schedule. Additionally, residents of our city again showed what it means to be a good family member, friend and neighbor!

As we close in on the end of 2011, it is fitting that we take time out on November on November 24, 2011, Thanksgiving Day to give thanks. As time goes on in the future, we will remember 2011, for the severe weather we experienced. It is really incredible to think that the city experienced four declarations of emergency, four designations as a natural disaster area, two call outs of the National Guard and established two emergency shelters for its citizens in one year. Considering what we have gone through this year, we are incredibly fortunate to not have experienced a loss of life from these events.

I used to watch other parts of our country be battered by severe weather over the years and think how fortunate we are in Southern New England as our weather, aside from a snowstorm or two was generally pretty sedate. We generally think of hurricanes affecting the Southeastern U.S., earthquakes in California, floods and tornados in the Midwest, blizzards in the plains states, Rocky Mountains and Northern New England but this year, we had it all in Westfield. I for one, am very thankful this year will soon be over.

One of the observations I have made in the wake of all of these events is how important it is for a sense of normalcy to quickly return to our lives to help ease the anxiety. We saw this with the decision to reopen the Munger Hill School Kindergarten classes for the end of the year. The kids really seemed to enjoy the opportunity to finish the year together in a large combined class held in the gymnasium. And during the recent storm, we made the decision to run the sanitation and recycling trucks on a regular schedule and people appreciated that and wondered how we pulled that off. But the last observation I have probably would be the most easily overlooked by adults, not realizing how important it was for our children. On Sunday, October 30, I was in an emergency management meeting at the police station to review operations as of that point. And as the decision was made to cancel school and the meeting began to wrap, a few of the staff in the meeting, looked at me and asked, "What are you going to do about Trick or Treating?"

At that moment the last thing on my mind was Trick or Treating. We had over 17,000 households without power and our shelter operation was just getting underway. I remember answering back, "...well we'll need to cancel that." And then I added something like, "Who knew this was an official city function?" Well then you can imagine the next question. "Mayor we have people already asking us if we can schedule a make-up day." So in the spirit of moving on with business, I said that I would think about it and make a decision on Monday.

Well Monday arrived and it still wasn't much better across the city and I wasn't thinking we could be in position to pull off a make-up night. But, I began to be barraged by requests to hold a make up night by parents and kids across the city. So after giving it some more thought and deciding already that the schools would be open Monday and the sidewalks and road routes were generally clear so that school could safely open we decided on Thursday that Monday, November 7 would be a good day to hold our make up Trick or Treating Day as school was scheduled to be closed on Tuesday.

As my wife and I took our own kids out that night for Trick or Treating, we were met by both parents and kids saying thank you for doing this. Many said to me that after a tough week, the kids were looking forward to putting on their customs and heading out to haunt their neighborhoods. I was a little nervous a first if people got the message, but as I walked around, I saw many houses with their porch lights on sending the signal to the ghouls and goblins that they were welcome to come to the door. And by the way, I was told we even made a CNN broadcast. So thank you Westfield for helping make our make up Trick or Treating night a special night for our kids.

Almost lost in the aftermath in the storm was the fact that we had an election on November 8. Congratulations to all those citizens that gathered signatures over the spring and summer to put their name in front of us for the opportunity to serve their city in elective service. And to the winners, congratulations and get ready for a busy year that is already promising to be 2012. There have been some people asking why the turnout was so low, less than 20%. Some suggested the storm; some would say the lack of a mayor's race and some would say a general satisfaction by the citizens at large. Here's what I know, only 1 in 5 registered voters came out to vote. In general, in local elections even when there is a mayor's race and a hot topic, you may only get 35-40% of registered voters to vote. A general observation of voting history shows that a Presidential election turns out the most voters, generally well above 60%. A statewide election generally a little less but clearly both turnout more voters than local elections. That's always seemed odd to me as the most visible use of your tax dollars is right here in the city and your best chance to talk to a decision makers is also right at the local level. So for whatever reason the turnout was light, I would like to say thank you to those citizens that took the time to cast their votes. That's what a democracy is all about and that's what America's been about since 1776.

I would also like to say thank you to Mr. Patrick Kennedy and the Westfield High School Band who represented the city at the City of New York's 9/11 10th Anniversary Veterans Day celebration.

<http://www.nycveteransdaycelebrations.com/>. I would also like to thank all of the parents, business and citizens that donated to this cause. This was a large effort and the city responded. And I am very thankful that the band traveled back to Westfield in time to march in our own Veterans Day parade.

And speaking of Veterans Day, I would like to thank the members of the Westfield Veterans Council and all the units that participated in our parade and ceremony. I would also like to say thank you to all that turned out to show your support and thank a veteran for their service. For without them, we would not be here today.

And lastly, I would like to thank all of the people, volunteers, National Guard troops and mutual aid responders, businesses, WSU staff and students that have helped us get back on our feet this year. It was a challenging year and one we will not soon forget.

We have just published another edition of “around the Whip City.” So please check that out at <http://www.cityofwestfield.org/?p=3894>. Don’t forget to watch my TV show...”It’s Your City.” It is on Channel 15 on Sundays at 4PM, Wednesdays at 8PM and Thursdays at 10AM and 10PM. It can also be seen anytime at <http://vimeo.com/channels/201443>.

And lastly, brush pick up will conclude the week of November 28. Brush will be picked up according to your sanitation schedule. If your rubbish is picked on a Monday, then your street will have its last brush pick up on that same day. The Twiss Street Transfer Station will be open to receive brush from 7-3 next week Monday – Wednesday, off for Thanksgiving and open again on Friday and Saturday. For more information check the city’s website at www.cityofwestfield.org.

As always if you have any questions call or email me at 413.572.6201 or mayor@cityofwestfield.org.

Respectfully,
Dan Knapik, Mayor